

## **Lander December Meeting about 2016 seasons**

Group discussions focused on the Mule Deer Working Group's split limited quota and other season recommendations.

### **Group 1.**

Overall opposed to recommendations

Pros:

- The trial period
- Type 9s

Cons:

- Complication of regulations
- Season too long with type 1 & type 2 seasons
- SWR deer hunt WILL conflict w/current elk season dates
- Implementing seasons that do not necessarily help deer populations
- Not convinced this season structure will actually reduce crowding

Other thoughts:

- Need more access to utilize Type 3 licenses

With most white-tailed deer on private lands and few if any walk-in areas, we can work with landowners that would allow harvest to update the landowner access list. Otherwise, it might be wise not to apply for the Type 3 hunts.

- Elk area 28

- What elk?

It was a very warm fall, yet hunter success was better than in 2014, and was about the average for General License hunters since 2004, and was a little above average for November Type 4 hunters. We saw 1,047 elk in HA 28 in January, which is about the average observed since 1994.

- A lot of elk on private

This seemed to only be an issue in a couple of places (mostly in HA 25, not as much in HA28)

- Noticed increase in elk hunter numbers due to any elk season

Harvest survey indicated a 14% increase in hunter numbers in 2015, (which was less than expected) and an increase in antlerless harvest, and seemed to put less pressure on adult bulls and increased spike harvest, hopefully leading to improved bull quality over time.

- Elk area 24

- No bull hunting in November

The result of hunting bulls in November was seemingly inconsequential as only 4 more bulls were reported harvested in the 2015 season compared to the 2014 season.

Nonetheless this was an error in the 2015 hunting regulations that we are proposing to correct for the 2016 season. In Elk HA 24 we are proposing that unused Type 1 licenses will be valid for harvest of **antlerless elk only** in November.

**-HA 23 license holders shouldn't be able to hunt 128**

We are proposing that Elk HA 23 hunters will continue to have the ability to hunt in HA 128 from mid-November to mid-December. This is proposed to target elk that move off the Rattlesnake Hills into the Gas Hills/Beaver Rim area. We are however proposing to restrict unused Elk HA 24 Type 1 and Type 4 licenses in November. In November Elk HA 24 Type 1 and Type 4 licenses will only be used in HA 24 for antlerless elk (no longer able to hunt in 128).

Only 34 hunters with Area 23 and Area 24 licenses reported hunting in Area 128 in 2015. They only harvested 3 cows and 4 calves. Area 23 hunters will be allowed to hunt in Area 128 to reduce elk movement from Area 23 into 128 and help manage Rattlesnake elk toward objective.

**Group 2.**

Overall in support of recommendations because it will more effectively manage deer numbers by limiting hunter numbers as long as we do not over-subscribe the quota (over harvest)

**Pros:**

- Limiting number of hunters
- Potentially more effective than APRs at both limiting hunter numbers and harvest
- Will eliminate crowding from General hunters from other parts of the state.

**Cons:**

- Unknown quota numbers
- Increased violations
- Opposed to youths killing any deer. Cannot kill any does at current populations

**Other Thoughts:**

- Concern with overall numbers of deer (decline) numbers are not coming back

Mule deer numbers are lower than historic highs, but are recovering over the last 2 years with much improved habitat condition, which resulted from greatly improved precipitation. South Wind River and Sweetwater herd units are 20% below objectives (which were lowered in 2015) but are increasing – 2 years of near record fawn/doe ratios. Populations in South Wind River and Sweetwater herd units are near recent high levels seen in late 2000s.

- G&F is getting into the realm of managing people NOT wildlife

In many cases, that's what wildlife management is – managing people's use of wildlife. As a public agency, we are held accountable to the public (primarily hunters and anglers).

- Needed to have limited quota for several years - maybe decades

With buck only harvest, limited quota seasons don't influence the number of deer, only the proportion of bucks in the population. Neither Limited Quota seasons or Closing seasons will "bring deer back," it takes good habitat to improve fawn survival to increase populations. See handouts.

- Observed increase in pronghorn numbers locally - suggest an increase in quotas for 2016

Drought caused low fawn survival, followed by few yearling bucks in subsequent years for 2011, 2012, and 2013. Fawn/doe ratio lowest in 2012, yearling buck/doe ratio lowest in 2013. We have been conservative with “buck” harvest (Type 1 licenses), but harvest was likely still outpacing replacement. With the Beaver Rim pronghorn herd currently 19% below objective, we need to be conservative for at least another year. Also, the overall buck/doe ratio of 55 bucks/100 does is below the Special Management criteria (60-70 bucks/100 does). We are increasing Type 1 licenses in areas 68 and 106 where the buck/doe ratio is above 60/100.

**-Positive change to HA 25 elk boundary**

We agree, several hunters did seem to be able to find and harvest elk in the area added around Cyclone Rim. It may be too soon to tell if it will solve some long-term issues with elk moving across hunt area boundaries.

**-Continued predator control**

With current high mule deer & pronghorn fawn/doe ratios, no additional predator control actions are warranted. ADMB, County Predator Management Board/USDA Wildlife Services will continue with coyote “control” in several areas throughout the region.

**-Mountain lion quotas too low regionally**

Area 4 (Lander) mountain lion harvest limit of 8 per season from 2005 to 2012. Only met the limit 2 times (2010, 2012). The Harvest Limit was raised to 10 per season in 2013, 2014, and 2015 and has not yet been met in any of the last 3 years – less than one month left in 2015-16 season with 7 legal harvests as of March 8, 2016. Mule deer fawn/doe ratios have been the highest in nearly 20 years for 2014 & 2015 in November surveys.

**-Black bear numbers/concentration very high**

Black bear harvest has been fairly stable over last 5 years in HA 13, with 2015 harvest being the highest total at 27 (spring + fall). Female harvest limits have been met in 5 of last 10 seasons (spring or fall), and of those seasons closing at female harvest limit, 2 closed only a day or two earlier than the regular season closure (6/13/2014 and 6/14/2015). Black bears appear to be stable in the southern Wind River Mountains.

**-We need to address wolves**

This is being worked on at many different levels (locally, statewide and nationally).

**-Allow harvest of ravens to benefit sage grouse**

Ravens are protected under the “Migratory Bird Treaty Act of 1918”, as amended in 1972 as part of a treaty with Mexico. However, some actions have been initiated to remove ravens from landfills in southwest Wyoming, including Fremont County, over the last 2-3 years. Avicide was applied to bait at the Lander and Riverton landfills in 2013, with a minimum of 144 raven carcasses recovered as the result. Other removal efforts may be allowed under special permit. Sage grouse populations have increased, decreased, and are again increasing in Fremont County and most of Wyoming following weather patterns, regardless of predator control efforts.

**-Elk HA 28 dependant on snow levels - season closure should reflect this**

If this is related to November Type 4 seasons, we don’t feel we can hunt elk any later than we currently do, to avoid pushing elk into private lands where damage problems would either begin or dramatically increase.

### **Group 3.**

Overall in favor of split limited quota and type 9. (Possibly create a break between seasons)

Pros:

- Limit crowding
- Spread out applicants
- Ability to draw a type 1 and still possess a type 8
- Type 9 will help spread out archery applicants
- Extended season dates from the whitetail type 3 & type 8
- Giving youth extra chances

Cons:

- Won't address elk hunter crowding
- Might not be able to draw
- Youth shooting does
- "Youth" age being 16-18 years old (maybe stay below 16 years)

Other Thoughts:

- Give deer a break between seasons

This isn't needed if we don't implement split limited quota seasons.

- More research on how to increase 5-7 year old bucks
- 2015 seasons

We know antler point restrictions place abnormally high pressure on older age bucks, and in years of low buck/doe ratios, "standard" general license seasons do the same with no limits on harvest.

- Too crowded in places

This is one of the primary reasons for the LGM WG's recommendations for split limited quota seasons.

- Too many ATVs

This is likely a reason for perceived crowding problems, since actual numbers of hunters are not necessarily higher than they were 20+ years ago. But ATVs are making hunters more mobile, more visible, and more audible (you can hear them all day long in some areas), leading other hunters to think there are more hunters than there really are.

- Saw more deer

This is expected and mimics our observations for last 2 years.

- Saw more bucks

This is expected and mimics our observations for last 2 years (except for Sweetwater mule deer, where we saw more deer, but percent of bucks was lower than expected)

- Fat deer

This makes sense, since habitat has improved over last 2 years.

### **Group 4.**

Overall in support because quality of hunt balancing with opportunity

Pros:

- Facilitate a quality hunt
- Reduces number of hunter in field at one time
- Reduces pressure (Hunters) on deer
- Allows adjustment of quotas for or in future
- Generally draws more ethical hunter - more prior thought involved
- Prevents a person from killing animal and purchasing a license after to cover it
- This structure protects the youth general hunt
- Eliminates need for APRs

Cons:

- More research on how to increase 5-7 year old bucks
- Requires hunter to put in for draw and pay a processing fee
- Allow party permits?
- Might not get to hunt a deer every year
- May affect G&F revenue
- Overlaps current elk season

Other Thoughts:

- 2015 seasons
  - Antelope
    - Excellent
    - Can't draw permit for 5 years
  - Deer
    - Disaster, too many people (Area 92)

This is one of the primary reasons for the LGM WG's recommendations for split limited quota seasons.

Whitetail numbers still after EHD (Area 160)

WTD numbers are increasing again around Lander, but do appear lower than before EHD outbreak of 2013.

Saw a lot of deer, not many bucks

The number of deer has been increasing for last 2 years, buck numbers and ratios also increasing around Lander, but not quite as well in Jeffrey City areas. APRs focused harvest on adult bucks for 3 years (2012, 2013, 2014) and fawn survival/ yearling buck recruitment was low at the same time, so harvest of adults was outpacing replacement. 2015 harvest was for Antlered mule deer, allowing harvest of abundant yearling bucks taking pressure off lower numbers of 3-4 year old bucks.

Area 128 type 1, lots of people

- Elk

Too many people (Area 28)

Harvest survey indicated a 14% increase in hunter numbers in 2015, (which was less than expected) and an increase in antlerless harvest, and may have contributed to less pressure on adult bulls and increased spike harvest, hopefully leading to improved bull quality over time.

Elk not down – weather

We believe this was the primary reason for hunters having difficulty in finding elk in Area 28.

It was fine, not too many people

Although the opening few days seemed a little more crowded this year, the rest of the season seemed about right for numbers of hunters.

Saw wolves chasing elk in Maxon Basin

### **Group 5.**

Overall in support of the seasons as proposed but have issue with the youth general license

Pros:

- Would reduce crowding
- Limit number of NR licenses
- 3 year trial period

Cons:

- For Sweetwater, seasons too long (don't like season going until 10/31)

Other Thoughts:

-Restrict youth the same way we do other Gen license holders. Also should have to put in for LQ license NO EXTRA DAYS

Youth hunters with General Licenses will continue to have added opportunity with their seasons having additional dates valid for any deer to promote youth hunter retention and recruitment.

-Elk

Why are spikes excluded in Dubois?

Two years ago the Department received a number of comments requesting “spikes excluded” elk seasons in hunt areas 67 and 68. There seemed to be a feeling from the folks commenting that “spikes excluded” elk seasons had improved branch antler bull hunting in many areas within the Jackson Region. There is no biological reason for the restriction in areas 67 and 68 and we agreed to a three year trial period to determine if it had any affect in the Dubois area. 2016 will be the third year of spikes excluded in Dubois and we plan to remove the restriction for the 2017 season.

-Deer

Late season MD buck license in Area 157

There a no plans at this time to implement a ‘late season, trophy hunt’ in Area 157. This area is managed for recreational opportunity. Given the amount of agricultural production in the area, the Department is not interested in promoting limited, trophy hunting in the area. Rather the management objective is to provide high quality recreational opportunity for hunters while minimizing deer damage to agricultural crops.

What is going on in deer area 90? Saw fewer bucks

That is accurate. In 2010 the population declined significantly due to harsh winter conditions (the antelope populations in the area also declined). Following the winter die-off there were 2 years of extreme drought that resulted in very low fawn recruitment. These factors all contributed to lower buck numbers and quality. In response, license numbers were reduced and totaled only 50 in 2015.

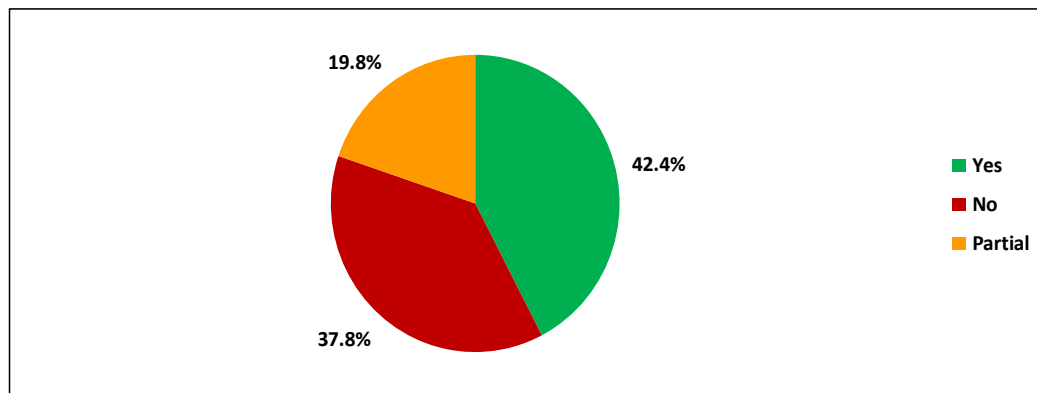
### **Game and Fish responses to Mule Deer Working Group Discussion**

A principal basis for creation of the Lander/Green Mountain Mule Deer Initiative was to collaboratively develop strategies to improve mule deer populations and mule deer hunting opportunity in the South Wind River and Sweetwater herd units. As the Working Group met, they gathered information about mule deer ecology, mule deer populations, habitats, past hunting seasons, and many other issues impacting mule deer in these herd units. In August 2015, the working group presented WGFD with mule deer management recommendations, including several recommended changes to the existing hunting season structure. The hunting season structure recommendations were presented to the public in December 2015, following extensive outreach during fall 2015.

The Working Group's primary goal for recommended changes to hunting season structure was to "Balance Hunting Opportunity with Reduced Hunter Crowding." Input received at a workshop held in April 2014, as well as responses to an initial hunter survey regarding these herd units indicated hunters were concerned about increasing hunter densities and decreasing quality of their hunting experience.

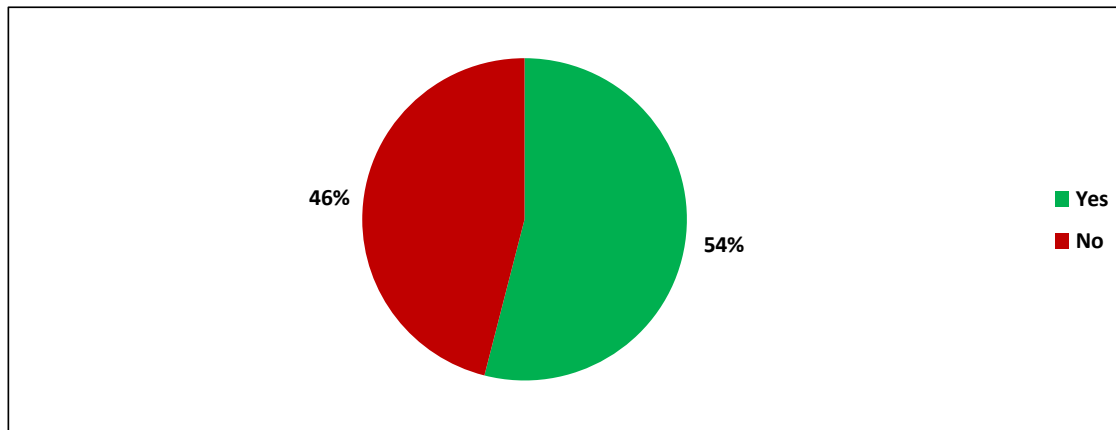
To address this goal the Working Group recommended a split limited-quota season structure for both herd units, a Type 9 archery only license valid for all five deer hunt areas, and continued General Deer Youth license any deer seasons. In fall 2015, the Working Group and WGFD embarked on an extensive outreach effort to engage the public and gauge their responsiveness on these recommended changes. A survey was developed and mailed to hunters in the Lander, Riverton, Jeffrey City, and Casper areas known to hunt mule deer in the South Wind River and/or the Sweetwater herd unit. The survey was also distributed during WGFD field contacts/game check stations and by email.

Approximately 1,900 contacts were made to solicit survey responses from those who hunt in these areas. Of the 217 responses received, 92 (42%) supported the recommendations, 82 (38%) did not support the recommendations and 43 (20%) partially supported the recommendations (Figure 1).



*Figure 1. Survey results for the Lander/Green Mountain Mule Deer Working Group's recommendations to implement split limited-quota seasons, a type 9 archery license, and maintain General Deer Youth License any deer seasons.*

“Partial support” was selected by 43 individuals when they only supported portions of the recommendations. Of those 43 responses, 24 supported limited-quota license seasons and 17 did not (for two responses, it was unclear whether or not they supported limited-quota license seasons and are not included in any further analyses). When assimilating these responses back into the survey as a whole, overall support for the limited-quota license season structure recommendation was almost evenly split with 116 (54%) in support and 99 (46%) in opposition (Figure 2).



*Figure 2. Survey results for the Lander/Green Mountain Mule Deer Working Group's recommendation to implement split limited-quota license seasons.*

The Working Group also presented their recommendations at WGFD post-season public meetings in Lander and Riverton in late-November and early-December, 2015. WGFD personnel presented the Working Group's recommendations in Rawlins and Casper. Overall, public input received at these meetings mirror that from the survey. Some supported the limited-quota license season recommendation and some didn't. There was general support in Lander and Riverton and, in contrast, opposition in Rawlins and Casper.

Based on survey data, along with input received at the public meetings and WGFD field contacts it is clear there is not over-whelming support to implement limited-quota license seasons in these herd units. Perhaps most importantly, a good number of people who were either contacted or filled out the survey continue to misunderstand the reason limited-quota license seasons were recommended. Many incorrectly assume limited-quota license seasons will increase mule deer numbers and thus tended to support the idea. Regardless, there remains a lot of confusion among the public what limited-quota license seasons will do, what they won't do, and how they will or will not affect hunting opportunity.

#### **A. Balance Hunting Opportunity with Reduced Hunter Crowding**

- *WGFD is not recommending implementation of limited-quota license mule deer seasons in the South Wind River or the Sweetwater herd units at this time for these reasons:*
  1. There simply is not enough support to shift to a limited-quota license season structure to address hunter crowding. It is clear hunter crowding, while a continued concern for some, is no longer a major concern for many.



2. There remains a significant amount of confusion and misunderstanding the effect limited-quota license seasons will have on mule deer populations and hunting opportunity. It is WGFD's perspective based on the survey and public input that many who support limited-quota license seasons simply do so because they believe it will result in increased numbers of mule deer in these herd units. Limited-quota license seasons will not bring mule deer back. As such, it would be a disservice to the public and to the resource for WGFD to unnecessarily restrict hunting opportunity. WGFD will continue to evaluate the need for implementing a limited-quota license structure in these herd units if and when the circumstances described in the "Hunting Season Structure" section change.
  3. The mule deer populations have increased the past two years in both herd units and, correspondingly, there are increased numbers of bucks available for harvest. This is likely alleviating complaints.
  4. Because limited-quota license seasons in these herd units would have far reaching statewide implications, WGFD needs to consider those implications and other options (i.e., "resident regions").
- The Working Group favored the statewide "resident region" concept to any other season structure including the split limited-quota license season recommendation. But, because the resident region concept would require change statewide, the Working Group focused on management in the South Wind River and Sweetwater herd units. The Lander Region will request Wildlife Division and Department administration re-examine the "resident region" concept for statewide implementation.
  - WGFD will carry forward the working group's recommendation regarding opening dates for white-tailed deer seasons under the existing Type 3 (Any White-tailed Deer) and Type 8 (Doe or fawn White-tailed Deer) license structure. The proposed opening dates of October 1 for these license types in Deer Hunt Areas 92, 94, 160 and October 15 in Deer Hunt Area 97, will be presented via the standard 2016 season setting process, and if supported by the public, will be implemented in the 2016 seasons.
  - WGFD will continue to propose General License seasons for youth hunters in each herd unit during the 2016 season setting process.
  - *The Type 9 archery-only license recommendation is a component of the limited-quota license recommendation and is unnecessary in the absence of limited-quota license seasons.*
  - WGFD will continue to consider how timing of deer hunting seasons may impact hunting for other species (and vice versa), with regard to hunter crowding and influence on harvest. This is particularly important in the South Wind River and Sweetwater herd units with respect to deer and elk hunting overlap, and which current seasons are designed to minimize conflicts.